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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: MILITARY SUPPLY ROUTES AND BASE QUESTIONS SPARK MEDIA WILDFIRES

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**¶1.** (U) Sensitive But Unclassified - Not for Internet Distribution.

**¶2.** (SBU) Summary: The February negotiations with governments in Central Asia over supply routes for coalition military operations in Afghanistan put Western media on hair trigger alert, so much so that otherwise responsible, fact-checking organizations repackaged stories from erroneous Reuters and Interfax wire reports. A "post mortem" of incidents in Dushanbe shows how keen interest in a topic, combined with incompetent reporting from a single source, can ignite a media fire impossible to extinguish in the age of instant and global communication. End summary.

Fateful Coincidence: Northern Distribution Network and Manas

3) (SBU) In early December the local stringer for Reuters asked the embassy press office about NATO plans to find new supply routes after attacks on truck convoys closed the eastern Afghanistan supply route from Pakistan. Post referred the reporter to comments made December 10 by Admiral Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. By December 22, State had issued basic Northern Distribution Network (NDN) points which are still valid: we are not seeking any new military bases in Central Asia; we want diverse supply routes for non-lethal cargo to support reconstruction and military efforts in Afghanistan; in search of diverse options, we had started reviewing commercial transit routes before the December attacks on convoys. Coincident with the spike of interest in NDN, on December 18 an anonymous source within the Kyrgyz Government told Agence-France Presse (AFP) that the Kyrgyz were preparing papers to close the base at Manas.

Let The Games Begin

**¶4.** (SBU) Fast forward through the New Year lull to Centcom Commander General Petraeus' January 17 meeting with President Rahmon. At a briefing with local reporters afterward, Petraeus mentioned that he would send a team within the next couple of weeks to discuss details of transporting commercial goods across Tajikistan to coalition forces in Afghanistan. When asked about closing the base at Manas, Petraeus said "we certainly have no plans to change anything." Post's Web site had English and Russian transcripts of his briefing online by opening of business Monday, and a few scattered reports in the government wire services accurately covered his brief comments.

**¶6.** (SBU) Imagine our surprise at the January 21 headline on a local newswire story, "One More Bridge to Unite Tajikistan and Afghanistan." Foreign Minister Hamrahon Zarifi that day had announced at a press conference that the United States would build a bridge in Tajikistan's Farkhor District, in addition to

the Nizhniy-Pyanj Bridge completed in August 2007. When asked the week before by President Rahmon about a second bridge, General Petraeus had said he "would like to help," but the U.S. side needed to see the current bridge utilized to its full potential. (Note: Currently, about 200 vehicles cross the Nizhniy Pyanj Bridge daily, but it has a capacity of 1,000 per day. End note.) In response to queries that followed and to avoid an outright contradiction of the foreign minister's comment, the press office issued a statement that "while the embassy did not rule out the possibility of a second bridge, the United States did want to see the current bridge utilized to its full potential."

#### The Rush to be First - With Old News

¶7. (SBU) After the Ambassador's February 6 meeting with President Rahmon about the upcoming visit by U.S. Transportation Command to discuss transport routes, she found a phalanx of local reporters waiting for her in the lobby of the presidential administration. She relayed the highlights, that the president had once again expressed Tajikistan's readiness to support the transit of commercial goods to Afghanistan through Tajikistan via truck or railroad and that a TransCom delegation would take up the issue during their visit in the near future. In response to a question about future military cooperation, the Ambassador listed joint training, conferences, and infrastructure development.

¶8. (SBU) Before the Ambassador was back at the embassy, the press office phones lit up with calls from Japanese NHK TV, AFP Moscow, ABC Islamabad, and CNN London, all wanting to confirm information on the Russian Interfax wire, the Russian Kommersant Web site, Reuters, and BBC TV quoting the Ambassador that "Tajikistan was ready to provide an air corridor for cargo to Afghanistan." Russkoye Radio was broadcasting that Tajikistan had offered the United States a military base in Tajikistan to

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replace Manas. The press office went into manic counterspin, issuing corrections in English, Russian, and Tajik, and calling bureau chiefs to correct misinformation - no bases, no new agreements about overflights (we have had permission for overflights since 2001), and the "readiness" of Tajikistan to allow overland transit of non-lethal cargo.

¶9. (SBU) The local Reuters stringer who had asked about NDN back in December started the blaze with a misleading story that "Tajikistan has agreed to offer its airspace for transport of non-military NATO supplies to Afghanistan to help Washington boost its transit lines in the region" because the imminent closure of the airbase in Kyrgyzstan, had left the United States "scrambling to find alternative supply routes for NATO forces in landlocked Afghanistan."

¶10. (U) The Tajik media, which are careful to stay in sync with the government, reported the facts correctly, citing sources within the presidential administration. Being in sync with their government, they mentioned the "necessity" of building another bridge across the Pyanj River "taking into consideration the needs of the international peacekeeping contingent in delivery of non-military goods to Afghanistan through the Central Asian region."

#### The Rush to be First - With Wrong News

¶11. (SBU) To downplay anticipation that an "agreement" might result from Transcom Commander Rear Admiral Harnitcheck's February 20 working level meetings with Government of Tajikistan officials, the press office issued a statement to media that Harnitcheck would consult with relevant ministries on next steps in transporting commercial goods across Tajikistan to coalition forces in Afghanistan. We also asked the MFA not to invite media, but, there they were, staked out again, waiting for Harnitcheck and the Ambassador after their meeting with Foreign Minister Zarifi. Harnitcheck noted the productive meeting with the foreign minister on commercial shipments of non-lethal goods

via highway and railroad across Tajikistan to Afghanistan, and said "we have not reached any agreements" but hoped to move forward in the near future.

¶12. (SBU) Within an hour Interfax was out in front with a report that an agreement had been reached, and the calls started coming in from international bureau chiefs in Istanbul, London, Moscow, and Islamabad. The press office thanked everyone for calling first and filing second, issued another statement of the facts, then started tracking the source of the basing information. Tajik TV reporters had Harnitcheck on tape stating that no agreement had been signed. Interfax has no reporter in Tajikistan, so the author of its stories is unknown. Other Tajik reporters told emboff the Reuters stringer contributed to Interfax, but emboff has no way of confirming this.

Black PR or Incompetence?

¶13. (SBU) Comment: These incidents show what can happen when discipline breaks down in the competition to be first to report a hot topic. The Reuters report on "a new air corridor" filed by Reuters' Tajik stringer was picked up without verifications by BBC TV, AFP, and the Associated Press; they apparently took for granted that Reuters had done the hard work of corroborating facts. The Reuters reporter may have cracked under pressure chasing the hot topic of the day to satisfy a highly competitive international news wire. More troubling is how he got the facts so wrong, when the Ambassador clearly stated, and other Tajik journalists understood, that the issue was land routes. The unprovable allegation that he wrote Interfax reports with the same wrong information raises the possibility of deliberate "black PR" to sow confusion about routes that support U.S. and coalition operations in Afghanistan. The story on Russkoye Radio about "bases in Tajikistan" that broke at the same supports this possibility.

¶14. (SBU) Comment continued. Believing it better for journalists to get the facts right than allow speculation to fill the vacuum, the Ambassador actively engages the media, in interviews with Tajik radio, TV, and newspapers; off-the-record briefings with Western correspondents; at public ceremonial events; and, the ever popular stake-outs. The value of this engagement was borne out by the impact of her March 5 interview in the local "Sobytsia" ("Events") newspaper, a straight Q&A on Tajikistan's 2010 parliamentary elections, the increase of troops in Afghanistan, supply routes, and an affirmation that the United States plans no new bases in Central Asia. Excerpts and references appeared in the Central Asian News portal, AFP, AP, Reuters, and the Iranian news agency, PressTV. For the time being, she may have satisfied the demand for NDN news, since we

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have had no more queries, even though the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided the formal agreement two weeks ago. End  
Comment.  
JACOBSON